

October 31, 2009 - Biking: GAP Trail Survey Finds 'Renaissance'

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Biking: GAP trail survey finds 'renaissance'

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Surveys can be a pain and a pleasure, especially when conducted in three phases.

They take hours, test the patience and people-skills of information gatherers and data entry personnel and challenge organizers to make accurate sense of the findings.

So, what does an 18-month study disclose about trail-related spending along the Great Allegheny Passage?

More than \$40 million in annual direct spending and another \$7.5 million in wages in 2008, according to the Trail Town Program, the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau and the Allegheny Trail Alliance.

"The builders of this nationally recognized trail promised an economic outcome and the study reveals a delivery on that promise," said Cathy McCollom, director of the Trail Town Program that revitalizes communities along the passage.

Linda McKenna Boxx, an internationally recognized trail-builder and president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance that is building and maintaining the passage, said hundreds of thousands of people pedal some or all of the trail every year. Some ride it daily.

John and Sandy Markle and Rod Darby, owners of the Trailside restaurant in West Newton, said that since May 2007 they have served customers from all 50 states and 25 countries, including Australia, China, Israel and India.

Donna Gambol, executive director of the visitors' bureau that promotes tourism in Westmoreland, Somerset and Fayette counties, said towns along the trail "have experienced a renaissance as new businesses, homeowners and visitors have contributed to their revival."

After more than 50 volunteers spent more than 1,000 hours conducting the surveys and entering their findings, Campos Market Research was hired to complete the study. Its findings were reviewed and validated by the Alex G. McKenna School of Business, Economics and Government at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe.

The study analyzed gross revenues attributed to the trail, business decisions influenced by the trail and trail-user demographics. Research was conducted in three phases from February '08 to August '09.

First, 117 businesses along the Great Allegheny Passage from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md., were surveyed on the trail's economic impact. Then, 1,272 trail users were surveyed in the 2008 season. Finally, 120 businesses were surveyed in March '09 to collect 2008 revenue and wage information and for comparison with 2007.

"When we started converting former railroad lines into trail networks more than 30 years ago, none of us had any idea how successful they would be," said Congressman John Murtha, D-Johnstown, a major supporter of the passage.

"The partnership created by government, non-profit, heritage and conservation groups has worked to provide limitless tourism and recreational opportunities throughout western Pennsylvania," Murtha said. "And, in so doing, we are transforming a symbol of our industrial past into a symbol of the future."

The complete study is available at www.trailtowns.org and www.GAPtrail.org.